

# Rabbit

*Oryctolagus cuniculus*



**LIFE SPAN:** 8 -12 years  
**AVERAGE SIZE:** 5 pounds

**PET SUPPLIES PLUS**  
GREAT PRICES. NO GEEKS.

written by an expert in the pet care industry and approved by a qualified exotic veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified exotic mammal veterinarian, go to [www.AEMV.org](http://www.AEMV.org).

**WILD HISTORY:** The first evidence of rabbits dates back to 10 million years ago in France! The rabbit population slowly spread across Europe, and people began keeping them domestically in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rabbits became popular pets in the United States in the 1800s, and have been a favorite human companion ever since. Currently they are the third most popular pet after the cat and dog.

**PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES:** Over 40 breeds of domestic rabbit are recognized by the American Rabbit Breeders' Association. Rabbits are not rodents; they are *lagomorphs*, which is the order that includes hares and pikas. Rabbits are prey animals, and their physical features are designed to detect danger. The eyes and ears are large, which allows for excellent sight and hearing. They have small front feet and large, powerful back legs and feet. The back legs are designed for explosive, quick bursts of speed in order to escape predators. The teeth of lagomorphs are "open-rooted" which means they grow continuously. The chewing and gnawing actions associated with healthy eating will wear the teeth down so they do not grow too long. Rabbits twitch their noses to expose all their highly sensitive scent receptors to the air, helping them to detect predators. When a rabbit's nose stops twitching, it's both very relaxed and secure in its surroundings, or it's asleep with its eyes open. A rabbit's ears represent about 10 percent of its body area. Aside from playing a critical role in the rabbit's acute sense of hearing, which is important in escaping predators, the big ears help the rabbit stay cool by dissipating body heat.

**NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION:** Rabbits are sweet, loving creatures. However, they are prey animals and this fact must be respected by the family. Being grabbed or picked up from over-head mimics a hungry hawk to a rabbit. Being held and cuddled is unnatural. Patience is required when bonding with a pet rabbit; you must earn its trust. Children must be supervised at all times when handling a

rabbit, as the rabbit is very fragile. Teach your child how to properly pick up the rabbit and how to handle it safely.

## **FEEDING:** Vegetarians (Herbivores)

Fresh hay should constitute the majority of your rabbit's diet, followed by fresh vegetables and then a plain pellet diet. A good quality high fiber hay (such as Timothy, orchard grass, Bermuda, brome, oat hay) should be offered daily to all rabbits. Young, pregnant and nursing rabbits can have some additional alfalfa hay. For adult rabbits, a commercially prepared timothy hay-based pellet should be offered. Feed ¼-1/2 cup pellets that are 14-15% protein and 25-29% fiber. A quality plain pellet diet is best. Diets that include seeds and nuts may result in malnutrition and obesity. Also, grains can upset the delicate balance of bacteria in the rabbit's gastrointestinal tract, causing gas and discomfort. Corn can cause blockages. Alfalfa hay-based pellets may be offered to young, pregnant, and nursing rabbits. These contain more protein and calcium but are lower in fiber.

**FRESH FOODS:** Healthy, fresh vegetables should also be fed to your rabbit. Broccoli tops, beet greens, carrots and carrot tops, sweet peppers, parsley, and dandelion greens are good choices. Fresh fruits in small quantities can be used as treats. Good choices are apples, pears and berries. If you find that your rabbit develops loose stools or diarrhea, you are probably feeding too much fresh food. If the problem continues after reducing fresh food, see your exotic pet veterinarian.

**\*\* Please avoid: yogurt drops, honey/nut/seed sticks, chocolate, pasta, breads, crackers, cookies, breakfast cereals, any human grade treats, green beans, corn and citrus.**

Since you will be feeding your rabbit a balanced diet, supplements are not necessary.

**WATER:** Clean, fresh water must always be available and should be changed daily. All water should ideally be free of fluorine and chlorine and heavy metals. We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a water conditioner. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for about 24 hours with exposure to ultraviolet light. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions.

**LITTER TRAINING:** Even in the wild, rabbits naturally tend to urinate and defecate in one certain area of their "domain". This is a way of marking territory. You can use this natural behavior to your advantage by training your bunny to use a litter box in order to keep the cage cleaner. Cat litters tend to be irritating to rabbit eyes and some can create health problems in rabbits, so recycled newspaper pellets or wood-stove pellets are recommended. Choose a different substrate for the litter box than what covers the bottom of the cage. Do not use pine or cedar shavings in the litter box.

**SPAYING AND NEUTERING:** It is extremely important to spay or neuter your rabbit; it should be considered just as important as spaying or neutering a pet dog or cat. By altering your bunny, the risk of reproductive cancers is reduced, aggressive behavior and urine spraying is reduced and the ability to litter train becomes easier. And importantly, by extending its healthy lifetime there is also a reduced risk of contributing to the over-population of pet rabbits.

## RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- Cage
- Water bottle or bowl
- Food bowl
- Hay, pellets
- Bedding
- Litter box
- Hide house
- Playpen
- Chew toys

**HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT:** A wire-sided cage measuring at least 4' x 2' x 2' is a good size cage for one rabbit and 6' x 3' x 3' should be used for two average-sized rabbits. Be sure the cage has good ventilation. Glass enclosures should not be used for rabbits as they hold in too much heat and humidity. Do not buy a cage with a wire floor; this will result in foot injuries and a condition known as "bumble-foot". Cages should have a solid plastic bottom, for safety and for ease of cleaning.

When allowing your rabbit out of its cage, be sure to monitor closely. Do not allow your rabbit to roam the house or a room when he or she is not supervised. Injuries to both the rabbit and/or your house are imminent. Before allowing your rabbit supervised play time, scan the room for power cords, sharp objects, items that your rabbit can easily pick up and eat, and other items that may be a danger to your pet.

**HIDE HOUSE:** The hide house is extremely important to the rabbit. Rabbits can be very shy creatures with a strong flight instinct. It is very important to supply them with a protected wooden, plastic or cardboard box to hide.

**WATER BOTTLE:** A full water bottle or bowl must be available at all times, refill it daily. Be sure to clean out the inside of the bottle thoroughly during the more intensive cage cleaning sessions every week. Water bottles will often become slimy inside, which will in turn harbor harmful bacteria. Your pet will most likely chew a bottle inside the cage, so be sure to attach the bottle to the OUTSIDE of the cage. Check the spout daily for any blockages to make sure your pet always has access to the fresh water. If you cannot place the bottle on the outside of the cage, a metal water bottle guard should be used.

**BEDDING:** We recommend an aspen bedding or soft recycled paper/newspaper bedding. Neither of these choices will cause allergic reactions or respiratory distress and it is easy to clean. **DO NOT use cedar chips, as they contain dangerous phenols, which are toxic to your pet.** Place enough bedding in the cage so your rabbit can happily tunnel underneath it. Spot clean your pet's cage daily by simply removing the soiled portions of bedding.

**TOYS:** Several types of toys should be available for your rabbit. Chewing toys such as wooden small mammal toys, hide houses, cardboard boxes, paper towel tubes and dried untreated fruit tree branches are all excellent toys for your rabbit. Rabbits MUST chew constantly in order to wear their teeth down, which grow on a continual basis. Therefore, toys that allow the rabbit to chew and wear those teeth down are invaluable. Stick to toys bought at the pet store, as these are generally made of pet-safe materials. Pesticide-free, dried fruit tree branches, such as pear and apple, can be offered, but be absolutely sure they are pesticide free. Also, wash them well with water and friction before offering them to your pet.

**HABITAT MAINTENANCE:** Daily maintenance should consist of spot cleaning by removing soiled substrate. The entire cage

and water bottle should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every week with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water
- Vinegar & water (1:8) or bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage "furniture" should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- Rinse off all soap and bleach thoroughly with plain water before re-introducing your pet to its enclosure.
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH - IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION

**GROOMING & HYGIENE:** It is not necessary to bathe your rabbit. Rabbits are extremely neat and will groom themselves! Regular brushing, especially during shedding, is important however, as rabbits cannot vomit up excess hair ingested while grooming. Regular nail trims will be necessary. If it seems as if your rabbit has not been grooming, it may be ill. Contact your exotic pet veterinarian.

**SIGNS OF A HEALTHY ANIMAL:** Healthy rabbits have a rounded, full body and smooth, even fur with no bald patches. The nostrils, rump area, under-chin area, ears and eyes should be clear and free of discharge - fur should not be damp or stained in any way. Your pet should have bright eyes; teeth should be even and well aligned with no staining around the chin; breathing should be even and not labored, with no wheezing or gurgling sounds. Healthy rabbits are energetic and alert.

## SOME COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE VETERINARY EVALUATION INCLUDE:

### HEALTH ISSUE                      PHYSICAL SIGNS

<b>Gastro-intestinal upset (GI stasis)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lethargy</li><li>• Loss of appetite</li><li>• Reduced feces</li><li>• Abdominal distension</li></ul>
<b>Mites, lice, fleas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hair loss</li><li>• Red skin</li><li>• Scratching</li></ul>
<b>Traumatic injury</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Open wounds</li><li>• Lameness</li></ul>
<b>Abscesses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Swellings on face, feet, body</li></ul>
<b>Upper Respiratory Infection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Nose or eye discharge</li><li>• Sneezing</li><li>• Wet front paws</li></ul>
<b>Dental Problems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Drooling</li><li>• Loss of appetite</li><li>• Reduced feces</li></ul>

Please visit the House Rabbit Society website ([www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)) for more information